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## Review of *Women Talking*—Miriam Toews

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Review of: **Toews, Miriam. 2018. *Women Talking*. London, UK: Faber & Faber. 216pp., h/c. \$24.00.**

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*Women Talking* is Canadian writer Miriam Toews' seventh novel. She has also written a memoir about her father and starred in the 2007 art house film about Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico, *Silent Light*, written and directed by Mexican filmmaker, Carlos Reygada. Toews has won numerous awards, including the prestigious Governor General's Award for her novel, *A Complicated Kindness* in 2004.

Before *Women Talking* actually begins, it is preceded by "A Note on the Novel," outlining the historical background on which *Women Talking* is based. From 2005 to 2009, many of the female colonists of the insular Mennonite settlement of Manitoba, Bolivia, awoke in regular intervals in the morning unable to explain why they felt "drowsy and in pain, their bodies bruised and bleeding" (from the preface, n. pag.). Their claims were dismissed as divine retribution, Satanic attacks, lies to conceal their pregnancies, attention-getting schemes, or simply "wild, female imagination." Ultimately, eight male colonists were convicted of rape and received lengthy prison sentences. They had used an animal anesthetic spray to render their victims unconscious in order to rape them, some on multiple occasions.

When responding to film, literature, and/or television series, ethnic and religious minorities generally voice concern about the potential confusion uninformed consumers may have about unbecoming representations and the differences between fact and fiction portrayed in the media. Mennonites and other plain groups are no different. Toews takes a few steps to be considerate of her people. She does emphasize the novel's historical background since the note mentioned above was placed directly after the dedication page at the novel's beginning instead of at its end, a place that it might be easily overlooked. Yet, she chooses a fictional name, Molotschna Colony, for the setting so as not to confuse readers, and no acts of gruesome violence and rape are described. Doing so would have likely made readers uncomfortable, since the youngest reported victim in Manitoba

Colony was three years old (Friedman-Rudovsky 2013). Consequently, Toews seemingly does not want to alienate readers of her faith or pen a revenge novel. For her, *Women Talking* is simply "a reaction through fiction to these true-life events, and an act of female imagination" (n. pag.).

Toews, who currently resides in Toronto, confesses to be Mennonite and to pray, at times, for "her distant family" in the Manitoba community in Bolivia, the colony named for the province where she grew up. In her view, the criticism voiced in the novel comes from an inside perspective.<sup>1</sup> *Women Talking* is, however, much more than a book of criticism. The highly acclaimed novel fosters empathy for the victims of violence who might otherwise be forgotten and engages in unexpected, passionate, theological discussions on forgiveness, eternal life, love, and the status of women as humans. In fact, the female protagonists seek to reach an informed consensus about how to proceed with their lives, a consensus commensurate with the tenants of their faith.

The story takes place over a two-day period, in which most of the Mennonite men have gone to the city to try to post bail for the eight male colonists who have been arrested for their own protection from acts of violence within the community. When the men return, the estimated 300 women who have been raped over a four-year period are expected to forgive the men or leave the colony.

Readers accustomed to linear, plot-driven texts with analytical, abstract argumentation may need some time to get used to the novel's orality and its form of communication. At times repetitive and additive, the text echoes oral features of Plautdietsch, the native language of some Mennonite groups. Moreover, orality in the communal, pacifist society works toward the stability of the group. Even when Salome – one of the Friesen women who attacked one of the perpetrators with a scythe and later asked for forgiveness – spews verbal rage, she is not ostracized but brought back into the fold through active listening and a careful choice of words. In these respects, *Women Talking* reflects Mennonite culture and is a masterpiece of contemporary Mennonite literature.

<sup>1</sup> Miriam Toews discussed these aspects of her Mennonite faith on a book tour of *Die Aussprache*, the German translation of *Women Talking*, at the Ökumenisches Forum Hafencity, Hamburg, on March 26, 2019.

As the title indicates, *Women Talking* is primarily made up of invented dialogue between eight fictional Mennonite women of the colony, four women from two families each who represent three generations. The dialogue almost gives the novel the feel of a play as the story unfolds before the audience and is interrupted only by the occasional singing of hymns, concerns about daily life, a few anecdotes, nightfall, and some commentary by the male narrator, August Epp, who is Molotschna's school teacher and a community outsider. Epp is in love with the spinster, Ona Friesen, who has been impregnated by one of her rapists. In his eyes, Ona can do no wrong, so when she asks Epp to write down the minutes of the meeting, he gratefully accepts the honor. The narrator acts as a mediator between the Platdietsch-speaking society represented by two families of illiterate women and non-plain readers, for whom he provides the minutes in English.

Over the course of the novel, the Loewen and Friesen women must decide how to keep themselves and their families out of harm's way. As the women see it, they have three options: do nothing, stay and fight, and leave. The Loewen women tend to support the idea of leaving, while the Friesen women lean toward staying and fighting. Doing nothing is only an option selected by a few women not present at the meeting, so for the female representatives, only the other two options remain. Since the illustration assigned to the stay and fight option depicts a woman and a man pointing knives at each other, one can assume that the end for the group of pacifists is more or less predetermined.

The women open their meeting that takes place in the loft of a hay barn (a place symbolically located between heaven and earth) with a foot washing ceremony. Afterwards, they then begin to consider a host of questions, questions which they have been discouraged from asking. For example:

- whether the women who have been treated like animals should act as such;
- whether the women should forgive the men so that they will not be excommunicated and lose their place in heaven;
- whether coerced forgiveness is true forgiveness;
- whether "pretending to forgive with one's words and not with one's heart is a more grievous sin than simply not to forgive" (p. 26);
- whether 13- or 14-year-old boys pose a threat to the girls and whether the women leave and take the boys along;
- whether the men are guilty of not stopping the attacks or knowing and doing nothing about them; and
- how the women can be good wives if they leave the men.

In the end, there is only one viable solution, but as a fictional thought experiment, the Loewen and Friesen characters take a path much different from the historical women on whom the book is based (Friedman-Rudovsky 2013). The novel, therefore, becomes a modern fairy-tale of sorts, but one marked by great suffering. Both the female protagonists in *Women Talking* and the actual Mennonite women of Manitoba Colony are caught between a rock and a hard place, just as some readers might be especially in light of the recent reports of sexual abuse surfacing in Mennonite and Amish communities (Hoffman and Masoner 2019; Smith and Bradbury 2019). Although some readers may come to different conclusions than the female protagonists in Toews' novel, it is time to finally ponder the sum of the aforementioned questions and give victims a protected space to voice their concerns. The fictional survivors in *Women Talking* have not been silenced; they take action. What about the rest of us?

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